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ABSTRACT

The relationship between classroom absenteeism and academic performance has been well documented. To assess the relationship between absenteeism and traditional stress risk/buffer factors, depressogenic attributional style, depression and academic performance, 68 students completed the Internal-External Control Scale, two versions of life event changes scales, a student version of the Jenkins Type A Behavior Scale, the Beck Depression Inventory, and an attributional questionnaire. Absenteeism was assessed by the number of times a student was not present to turn in assignments or tests. Academic performance was determined by mid-term and final examination scores. The previously reported negative relationship between classroom absenteeism and academic performance was confirmed, although none of the stress or depressogenic factors were significantly related to absenteeism. The findings suggest that absenteeism as a reflection of stress-related issues poses problems and solutions very different from those present when absence behavior is part of a rational coping strategy or due to low interest. (JAC)

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RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN CLASSROOM ABSENTEEISM AND STRESS RISK/BUFFER FACTORS, DEPRESSOGENIC ATTRIBUTIONAL STYLE, DEPRESSION AND CLASSROOM ACADEMIC PERFORMANCE

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The relationship between classroom absenteeism and academic performance has been well documented (Kooker, 1976, Rozelle, 1968, Moos and Moos, 1978, Jenne, 1973 and Street, 1975). Absenteeism is typically associated with lower earned grades and less than expected learning. There is, however, little research which has investigated student characteristics associated with absenteeism. In the industrial work place, absenteeism appears to be often related to psychological factors such as depression and stress (Selzer, et.al., 1979, Gupta and Beehr, 1979, Dukey, 1979, and Jenkins, 1980).

The current study was designed to assess the relationship between absenteeism and traditional stress risk and buffer factors, depressogenic attributional style, depression and academic performance. Stress was considered a multi-dimensional variable and several aspects were assessed. Stress as life event change was predicted to be associated with absenteeism. Rabkin and Struening (1976) reviewed the relationship between life events and negative health consequences, and Lloyd et.al. (1980) reported on the negative relationship between life events and academic performance.

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A second stress related variable is the Type A behavior pattern. Although its effects on long term health consequences are well established (Review Panel on Coronary Prone Behavior, 1981), the relationship between Type A pattern and academic performance is mixed (e.g. Matthews et.al., 1980). Additionally, since most stress appears to be generated by social interactions, a third aspect of stress, social stress, was also predicted to be positively related to absenteeism.

Of a number of possible stress buffer factors, internal locus of control has been consistently found to reduce the negative consequences of life change, (e.g. Kobasa, 1979). Internal locus of control has also been found to be related to higher academic perfomance (Phares, 1976).

Based on a general model of learned helplessness and depression (Abramson et.al., 1978, Seligman, et.al., 1979), it was predicted that absenteeism would be related to depression and absentee students would have a more depressogenic attributional style.

Methodology

Sixty-eight subjects were administered the Internal-External Control Scale (Phares, 1976), two versions of life event changes (Holmes and Rahe, 1967, Marx, et.al., 1975), a student version of the Jenkins Type A behavior scale, the Beck Depression Inventory (BDI) (Beck, 1967) and an attributional questionnaire patterned after the Seligman and Abramson model.

Attendance was not mandatory, and absenteeism was estimated by the number of times a student was not in class when assignments and tests were returned. Academic performance was primarily determined by scores and grades on a multiple choice type midterm and final examination.

Results

Correlational relationships are summarized in Table 1. A consistent

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Insert Table 1

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negative relationship was found between the number of absences and academic performance, with a correlation of r=-.42, p=.001 for the final grade. None of the stress related variables were significantly related to absenteeism. External locus of control was in the predicted direction, but was low and nonsignificant. Despite lower performance on the midterm and final, there was no relationship between absenteeism and depression. In fact, the correlation was opposite the predicted relationship but not significant. Depressogenic attributional style scores were also opposite the predicted direction, r= -.23, p=.056 (two tailed test of significance).

Discussion

The previously reported negative relationship between classroom absenteeism and academic performance was confirmed although none of the stress or depressogenic factors were significantly related to absenteeism.

In assessing the physiological effects of social environments incl' ing classrooms, Kiritz and Moos (1974) found a physiological component in absenteeism which should have been assessed by the two measures of life event risk factors. The nonmandatory attendance requirement of the class may have obscured this component since nonattendance did not have to be justified and therefore more likely to occur than in settings where attendance was mandatory. If attendance is mandatory, one might expect a higher percentage of absentees with

physiologically related symptoms than found in this study. In addition, Kanner, et.al., (1981) reported that life event measures were better in predicting long range (2 year) health status whereas a "daily hassles" life event measure may be a better predictor of concurrent health status.

In as much as the literature has consistently found that external locus of control is associated with lower grades, and in this study the absent students did in fact achieve lower grades, one would have expected a higher correlation between absenteeism and external control. The reported nonsignificant correlation may have been a result of the sample which produced small n's in the higher absenteeism categories, or due to a threshold phenomenum whereby any absences above the threshold are products of a similar locus of control. To assess these possibilities, a t-test was conducted to compare locus of control scores of students who had no absences with scores of students with one or more absences. The combined absences category was significantly more external, 10.9 to 8.6, $t = -2.27$, $p = .027$.

The lack of significant findings for the depression inventory was surprising since the inventory was administered subsequent to the receipt of midterm grades. One would have expected some situational depression in response to the lower midterm grades. Very recent reserach, reported after the data for this study had been collected (Metalsky et.al., 1982), questions the use of the Beck Depression Inventory in attributional style research because the BDI reflects long term depression rather than transient mood shifts in response to situational factors (e.g. failing a midterm examination). In the current study, absenteeism was considered as a possible reflection of situational adjustment as well as possible academic term or longer difficulties. If replicated the depressogenic attributional scores suggest that absentee

students may if anything be buffered against mild depressive reactions in facing situational or enduring disappointments regardless of the method of assessing mood.

Because of the dearth of reserach in this area, it is difficult to assess the structural effects of specific class organization on the absentee behavior. For example, rather than an indicator of stress or personality style, absenteeism might have been considered a reasonable risk behavior embedded in a rational overall coping strategy if test emphasis was on the textbook, if class notes were easily accessible, and if the class was not considered as important as others in the student's schedule. In this particular class, 60-70% of the questions were based on the text and a list of learning objectives keyed the relevant testable material. Important class material was well outlined by overhead projector transparencies and cooperative sharing of notes was often observed. The class was an elective offering for students and none were psychology majors. High performance would have been considered less important than in a major course.

Although educators such as Street (1975) advocate immediate attempts to increase classroom attendance, further research is required before implementing viable methods. Absenteeism as a reflection of stress related issues pose problems and solutions very different from those emerging in situations where absence behavior is part of a rational coping strategy or due to low interest.

TABLE 1

	Estimate of Absenteeism
Academic Expecations and Performance	
Hoped for Midterm Grade	-.26*
Expected Midterm Grade	-.09
Midterm grade	-.29**
Score on final	-.22*
Final Grade	-.42***
Stress Variables	
Schedule of recent events	-.02
College schedule of recent events	-.01
Type A behavior pattern	-.02
Internal/External control	.11
Social Stress Rating	.09
Depression Variables	
Beck Depression Score	-.17
Depressogenic Attributional Scores	-.23#

*=p=.05
**=p=.01
***=p=.001
#=p=.056 in a two-tailed test of significance

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